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OPINION

Do we need a strict second lockdown to beat the virus?



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A padlocked gate is seen outside Cambridge Elementary School, which was ordered closed for two weeks by Fraser Health due to a COVID-19 outbreak, in Surrey, B.C., on Sunday, November 15, 2020. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Darryl Dyck

DARRYL DYCK/THE CANADIAN PRESS

There is no question that everyone wants to be done with this godforsaken virus.

There is also no doubt that the coronavirus is far from done with us.

So what do we do now, with winter at our doorsteps, the ever-worsening numbers delivering a daily beatdown, pandemic fatigue consuming us and a glimmer of vaccine hope on the who-knows-how-distant horizon?

Do we redouble our efforts (and perhaps suffering) and try to snuff out COVID-19 until we have a viable vaccine? Do we throw in the towel, get everyone back to work and accept that large numbers of infections and deaths are inevitable? Or do we take a “balanced” approach, successively loosening and tightening public-health restrictions depending on the severity of the epidemic curve?

So far Canada has, as per our national character, largely embraced a middle-of-the-road philosophy – shut down, but not too tight or for very long – with predictably mediocre results.

Our outbreak is nowhere near as bad as the one in the freedom-at-all-costs U.S.A. Nor are we enjoying the almost-back-to-normal life of Australians, who hunkered down until community transmission was snuffed out. Still, our current rate of 5,000 new cases a day is not sustainable, medically or politically.

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Going forward, which path will Canada – or more specifically its politicians and policy-makers – choose?

The approach espoused by signatories to the much-discussed Barrington Declaration – drop the restrictions, throw open the economy and lock away the vulnerable – has no real traction in this country. That’s just as well, because it hasn’t worked anywhere.

That still leaves some pretty stark choices: Do we aspire to snuff out the spread of the coronavirus entirely (hashtag #CovidZero) or pursue the “slow burn” approach, accepting that there will be virus spread but doing just enough to flatten the curve so hospitals are not overwhelmed and the public not too inconvenienced?

Each of these paths has economic consequences, and each will result in varying degrees of benefit and harm to our mental health, the developmental progress of children and more, none of which we can measure precisely.

On paper, aiming for zero cases is the smartest thing to do. Countries that have snuffed out community transmission are thriving. But, as Raywat Deonandan, an epidemiologist at the University of Ottawa, has noted, the successful countries have all acted swiftly and decisively, done relentless testing and contact tracing, sealed their borders and pursued cohesive national strategies.

Canada has done none of those things consistently. So do we really have the ability, let alone the stomach, to make a severe lockdown work?

The Australian state of Victoria achieved #CovidZero – or, as they like to call it, “double doughnuts” – but the lockdown lasted 100 days. It was also harsh: Citizens were only allowed out of their homes for one hour a day for shopping or exercise, there was an 8 p.m. to 5 a.m. curfew, essential workers required permits and there was an “iron ring” around Melbourne, with travel severely restricted. No school, no restaurants, no religious services, no gyms.

Are Canadians in hard-hit provinces (which means everywhere outside the Atlantic bubble) willing to do that? Do politicians have the courage to impose such rules, enforce them and resist the backlash? If so, for how long?

Before it cracked down, the state of Victoria peaked at 63 cases per 100,000 people. Manitoba is hovering around 500 cases per 100,000; Alberta at 200; B.C. at 115. Quebec is at 150 too, even after two months of semi-lockdown. Our starting point is much more challenging.

There is much musing about imposing “circuit breakers” – short, sharp lockdowns – an Australia-lite approach. But to rein in an infectious disease, you need to stop spread for at least two cycles of infection; for the coronavirus, that means at least 28 days, and that would only be the beginning.

Half-measures, which seem to be a Canadian specialty, will only perpetuate the frustrating cycle of openings and closings, which has left much of the public frightened and perplexed about what they can actually do any more.

Short-term pain for long-term gain is an appealing pitch. But at this point, what is our level of pain tolerance?

It's easy for experts with full-time jobs to propose textbook solutions; they answer to no constituency. It's equally simple for politicians to embrace the rhetoric of a "balanced approach"; it's ineffective but also innocuous.

The wisdom of Solomon and a backbone of steel is a rare combination. Yet, it's one we all need right now, individually and collectively, to get through this pandemic. We can choose the painful certainty of a scientific approach or the uncomfortable ambiguity of a political one.

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